



YOUR BEST SOURCE OF LOCAL INFORMATION FOR
Marina del Rey • Playa del Rey • Del Rey
Venice • Santa Monica • Westchester
Playa Vista • Mar Vista
PUBLISHED EVERY THURSDAY

Print Page

Monday, March 23, 2009 Last modified: *Wednesday, February 25, 2009 3:37 PM PST*

Ballroom dancing program helps middle school students relate better to each other

BY VINCE ECHAVARIA

Facing each other in a circle as the song "Fever" played in the background, the students held hands, stood up tall and swung their arms around until they were on to their next dance partner.

And so went another ballroom dance class for students at Mark Twain Middle School in Mar Vista. While most of the sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade students at the school are used to being active in physical education classes, some students are also trying their hands at an uncommon middle school activity — ballroom dancing.

The two classes in the program, offered through the nonprofit organization Ballroom Madness, are intended to help the students better relate and respect each other.

"We're using ballroom dance to teach partnership and teamwork, one step at a time," Jane Dorian, Ballroom Madness executive director, said of the program. "We watch the kids learn how to connect with other kids. It teaches them manners, courtesy and respect."

The ballroom dance program at Mark Twain is among the efforts implemented by Los Angeles city prosecutor Veronica de la Cruz, who has worked at the school through City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo's Safe Schools initiative. The initiative, which began with a program in 2007 at Markham Middle School in Watts, focuses on eradicating crime in areas surrounding schools that are considered challenged.

The Safe Schools division has since expanded to nine middle schools throughout the Los Angeles Unified School District, where the assigned prosecutors work to abate nuisances and pursue criminals in the area of the schools, city attorney spokesman Max Follmer said. In addition to helping combat crime, the prosecutors try to create a better learning environment in their respective schools by organizing team building activities and after school programs, Follmer said.

For her efforts at Mark Twain, de la Cruz said she chose to incorporate ballroom dancing because of its ability to help the boys and girls from different backgrounds interact better and engage in a different way.

"I just valued what they could learn in there," she said of the class. "They have to relate to another person and they're learning all the skills that are important to growing up. It exposes them to different things."

De la Cruz, who grew up in Venice and graduated from Venice High School, noted how each school has its own challenges but the ballroom dancing program has been effective at Mark Twain by teaching the more than 100 involved students various skills.

"It's a very good fit for this school at this time and it has worked out great," she said.

Mark Twain principal Raul Fernandez said the Safe Schools initiative is a "natural transition" of a program at Venice High to the middle school, and he is pleased to see the dancing program's impact on the students' social, physical and academic growth.

Program artistic director Danny Ponickly and dance teacher Aurora Mendizabal also praised the students' progress as they take part in the activity. The young students may be a little hesitant with the concept at first, but they have become more comfortable, Ponickly said.

"It's an opportunity for them to do something different," he said. "The class starts to take care of itself and it gets to a point where gentlemen are dancing with ladies."

De la Cruz added, "They are becoming more confident and the way they relate to each other is changing. They've learned a lot and they're having fun."

The city prosecutor said she hopes that the ballroom dancing program and other efforts of the Safe Schools initiative at Mark Twain will encourage parents of children who attend schools outside the community to bring the students back to the Mar Vista area.

"As someone who grew up here I recognize the importance of having a community school," de la Cruz said. "This is their school and it's a great school."

The Mark Twain ballroom dance classes are planning to have two performances for school students and an evening performance for their parents April 1st.